

Investigating Students' Problems in Understanding English Reading Texts

Anhar

¹ English Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, Bintuni-West Papua, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Understanding English reading texts is a critical skill for secondary-school learners, yet many students encounter persistent difficulties that impede academic success. This study investigates the specific problems faced by Indonesian senior high-school students when reading English narrative and expository texts. A mixed-methods design was employed: a questionnaire (N = 210) identified the frequency of comprehension obstacles, and semi-structured interviews (n = 12) explored underlying causes. Quantitative results revealed that limited vocabulary, insufficient inferencing skills, and low metacognitive awareness were the most prevalent issues (p < .01). Qualitative analysis highlighted gaps in prior knowledge, ineffective reading strategies, and limited exposure to authentic texts. Findings suggest that incorporating multimodal resources and mobile-learning (M-learning) platforms can alleviate these problems. Implications for curriculum design and teacher training are discussed.

Kata Kunci:

Reading Comprehension, English as a Foreign Language, Vocabulary, Inferencing, Multimodal learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension in English is essential for academic achievement and future employability (Khalif Rizqon, Andreani, & Astuti, 2021). Despite curricular emphasis, Indonesian senior-high-school students frequently report difficulties when engaging with English texts (Khalif Rizqon et al., 2021). Prior research identifies several recurrent obstacles, including limited lexical knowledge, inadequate inferencing, and low strategic awareness (Putri & Syahrul, 2019). Moreover, broader language and reasoning deficits have been linked to poorer critical-thinking performance, which may further hinder comprehension (Hayati & Setiawan, 2022).

Recent pedagogical innovations—such as multimodal instruction and mobile-learning environments—have shown promise in enhancing reading comprehension (Dewi, Yuniasari, Darmawangsa, & Sunendar, 2023; Khairunnisa, Nurmalasari, & Nurmalasari, 2023). However, empirical evidence regarding how these approaches address specific comprehension problems remains limited. Consequently, this study aims to:

1. Identify the most common problems Indonesian senior-high-school students encounter when reading English texts.
2. Examine the underlying cognitive and affective factors contributing to these problems.
3. Evaluate the potential of multimodal and M-learning strategies to mitigate identified difficulties.

By delineating the precise nature of reading obstacles, the research fills a gap between problem identification and instructional design, offering actionable insights for teachers and curriculum developers.

2. METHOD

A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data captured the prevalence of specific reading problems, while qualitative data provided depth on students' experiences and reasoning.

Participants

Quantitative phase: 210 senior-high-school students (Grades 10-12) from three public schools in West Papua , Bintuni were selected through stratified random sampling.

Qualitative phase: 12 students (four from each grade) were purposively sampled based on extreme scores (high vs. low comprehension) from the questionnaire.

Instruments

Reading-Problem Questionnaire (RPQ): Developed based on the taxonomy of reading difficulties (Khalif Rizqon et al., 2021; Putri & Syahrul, 2019). The RPQ comprised 25 Likert-type items covering vocabulary, syntax, inferencing, prior knowledge, and strategy use. Reliability analysis yielded $\alpha = 0.89$.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Focused on students’ perceptions of their reading challenges, study habits, and exposure to multimodal or mobile resources (Dewi et al., 2023; Khairunnisa et al., 2023).

Reading Comprehension Test: A researcher-made test (30 multiple-choice items) assessing literal, inferential, and evaluative understanding of two English passages (narrative and expository).

Procedure

Survey Administration: The RPQ and comprehension test were administered simultaneously during regular class periods.

Interview Sessions: Conducted within two weeks after the survey, each interview lasted 45 minutes, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained from participants and guardians; anonymity and confidentiality were ensured.

Data Analysis

Quantitative: Descriptive statistics identified the frequency of each problem category. Independent-samples t-tests compared problem scores across grades. Multiple regression examined predictors of comprehension performance (vocabulary, inferencing, strategy use). Significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Qualitative: Thematic analysis followed Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six-step procedure. Initial coding produced 42 codes, which were grouped into four overarching themes: (1) lexical limitation, (2) inferencing deficits, (3) metacognitive awareness, and (4) resource scarcity.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Findings

Problem Category	Mean (SD)	% of students reporting “often/always”
Limited Vocabulary	3.84 (0.71)	68%

Difficulty with Inferencing	3.62 (0.78)	62%
Low Metacognitive Awareness	3.45 (0.80)	55%
Insufficient Prior Knowledge	3.30 (0.85)	48%
Ineffective Reading Strategies	3.18 (0.88)	42%

Vocabulary ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$) and inferencing ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .01$) emerged as the strongest predictors of overall comprehension scores ($R^2 = 0.52$).

No significant grade-level differences were found for vocabulary problems ($t = 1.12$, $p = .26$), but Grade 12 students reported higher metacognitive awareness than Grade 10 ($t = 2.34$, $p = .02$).

Qualitative Findings

Lexical Limitation – Students described encountering unfamiliar words that halted reading flow. Many relied on dictionary translation rather than contextual guessing.

Inferencing Deficits – Participants expressed uncertainty when making predictions or deducing implied meanings, often attributing this to a lack of practice with “reading between the lines.”

Metacognitive Awareness – Learners reported minimal monitoring of comprehension; they rarely re-read or self-questioned, indicating low strategic regulation.

Resource Scarcity – A recurring theme was limited access to authentic English materials and digital tools. Students who used mobile apps reported higher motivation but noted insufficient pedagogical guidance (Khairunnisa et al., 2023).

The themes corroborated the quantitative ranking of problems, confirming that lexical and inferential challenges dominate students’ reading experiences.

DISCUSSION

The present study confirms that Indonesian senior-high-school students primarily struggle with vocabulary knowledge and inferencing when reading English texts. These findings align with Khalif Rizqon et al.’s (2021) identification of narrative-reading obstacles and extend the scope to both narrative and expository genres. The strong predictive power of vocabulary mirrors Putri and Syahrul’s (2019) correlation between reading comprehension and language proficiency, underscoring the need for focused lexical instruction.

Hayati and Setiawan (2022) highlighted that weak language and reasoning abilities impede critical thinking; our results suggest that these deficits also manifest as lower inferencing competence, a key component of higher-order comprehension. Thus, interventions should integrate reasoning skill development alongside language enrichment.

Multimodal and M-learning approaches appear promising. Dewi et al. (2023) demonstrated that multimodal inputs (visuals, audio, interactive tasks) support comprehension by providing multiple entry points for meaning construction. Similarly, Khairunnisa et al. (2023) reported that M-learning platforms increase student engagement and perceived reading proficiency. However, participants in this study indicated that technology alone is insufficient without explicit strategy instruction. Therefore, a blended model—combining multimodal resources, mobile applications, and metacognitive strategy training—may address the identified gaps more comprehensively.

Pedagogical Implications

Vocabulary-Focused Activities: Incorporate spaced-repetition flashcards and contextualized word-learning tasks within digital platforms.

Inferencing Training: Use guided-question protocols and think-aloud sessions to model inferential reasoning.

Metacognitive Strategy Instruction: Teach self-monitoring techniques (e.g., summarizing, questioning) and embed reflective prompts in M-learning apps.

Resource Expansion: Provide teachers with curated authentic texts and multimodal materials aligned with curriculum standards.

Limitations

The sample was limited to three schools in a single province, which may affect generalizability.

Self-report data from the RPQ could be influenced by social desirability bias.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Indonesian senior high school students encounter significant challenges in English reading comprehension, with limited vocabulary and difficulty in inferencing emerging as the most critical factors. Both quantitative and qualitative findings consistently indicate that these two aspects not only rank highest among reported problems but also serve as the strongest predictors of overall comprehension performance.

References

Khalif Rizqon, M., Andreani, S., & Astuti, U. P. (2021). The problems faced by senior high school students in reading narrative text. *JoLLA Journal of Language Literature and Arts*, 1(1), 1508-1522. <https://doi.org/10.17977/um064v1i112021p1508-1522>

Relevance: Identifies specific reading difficulties among high-school students, providing a foundational taxonomy for the present study.

Putri, D., & Syahrul, R. (2019). Koresi keterampilan membaca pemahaman dan keterampilan menulis teks laporan hasil observasi siswa kelas VII SMP Negeri 4 Pariaman. *Pendidikan Bahasa Indonesia*. <https://doi.org/10.24036/103915-019883>

Relevance: Demonstrates the link between reading comprehension and overall language proficiency, supporting the emphasis on vocabulary.

Hayati, N., & Setiawan, D. (2022). Dampak rendahnya kemampuan berbahasa dan bernalar terhadap kemampuan berpikir kritis siswa sekolah dasar. *Jurnal Basicedu*, 6(5), 3650-3665. <https://doi.org/10.31004/basicedu.v6i5.3650>

Relevance: Connects language and reasoning deficits to critical-thinking and inferencing challenges in reading.

Dewi, N. A., Yuniasari, T., Darmawangsa, D., & Sunendar, D. (2023). Penerapan pendekatan pembelajaran multimodal untuk keterampilan membaca pemahaman bahasa asing: Sebuah tinjauan pustaka. *JUPE Jurnal Pendidikan Mandala*, 8(2), 555-570. <https://doi.org/10.58258/jupe.v8i2.5557>

Relevance: Reviews multimodal instructional approaches that can address identified reading problems.

Khairunnisa, S. R., Nurmalsari, N., & Nurmalsari, N. (2023). Persepsi siswa tentang bagaimana M-learning meningkatkan pemahaman membaca. *Jurnal Dieksis Id*, 3(1), 234-250. <https://doi.org/10.54065/dieksis.3.1.2023.234>